

**TESTIMONY OF THE HON. THOMAS E. PEREZ, MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
SUPPORT FOR HB 529**

**COMMITTEE HEARING
THE HONORABLE SHEILA HIXSON, CHAIR
WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE
MARCH 3, 2005**

My name is Thomas E. Perez, and I am President of the Montgomery County Council. I am also an Assistant Professor of Law at the University of Maryland. I am here today in my capacity as President of the Montgomery County Council.

While Maryland has a reputation for having a well-educated workforce, we have a significant number of adults who lack basic skills that prepare them to compete in the global economy. Our current adult education programs serve only 5 percent of the roughly 600,000 residents are in need of a high school diploma. And close to 1,000,000 Maryland residents need basic skills, GED classes, or need to learn to speak English. I strongly urge you to support HB 529, legislation that would give tax credits to businesses that provide their employees with adult literacy services. This is a critical first step in strengthening Maryland businesses and creating a universe of possibilities for adult learners.

Maryland is the short leg of the three legged financial stool that adult education requires—federal, local, and state resources. The state's failure to measure up is hurting our economy, our communities and our families. Currently, Maryland is ranked 46th nationally for level of State resources committed to adult education. In 2001 among East Coast states, Maryland was at the bottom of the list with expenditures of \$45 dollars per student. Maryland's share of the total budget for adult education has been approximately eight percent for at least the past two fiscal years. Furthermore, states such as California, Virginia, and Iowa, have developed comprehensive state Adult Education Plans to address issues of demand, quality, and accountability. Clearly, Maryland can do better in this area.

An investment in adult education is a sound monetary investment in Maryland businesses. In my conversations with prominent business community leaders in the healthcare, hospitality, and building and construction industries, I have learned that businesses are more successful if their employees are well-equipped to perform their jobs in our competitive and diverse global economy. Businesses that have invested in creating strong workforce that is bilingual and culturally competent experience fewer accidents, a higher quality of services, and greater profits. In some cases, employees are in need of English classes. In other cases, employees are in need of a high school diploma, a GED, a license in a particular trade or a bachelor's degree. In the healthcare industry, hospital administrators have underscored the problem regarding the shortage of licensed nurses in their respective hospitals. Maryland businesses see adult education as a critical workforce development issue that needs to be addressed in order to maintain a strong and vibrant economy. HB 529 would allow businesses to offer adult literacy services at the worksite or

in an educational or community setting. We need to support businesses that invest in their employees.

In Montgomery County and across the state, we have a critical need in the area of Adult ESL and literacy services. As Chair of the Adult ESL Task Force for the past 18 months or so, I have worked closely with Montgomery College, Montgomery County Public Schools, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, community activists, the philanthropic community, and other community stakeholders to develop a strategic action plan for increasing the quantity and quality of Adult ESL programs in Montgomery County. In March 2004, the County Council adopted the recommendations of the Task Force which included the formation of a non-profit organization that would work with providers and community stakeholders to increase the capacity of services in the County and effectively coordinate resources in this area.

Recent immigrants who reside in Montgomery County and across the state are eager to learn English and continue their education. Montgomery County alone serves approximately 23,800 students and has waiting lists of well over 2,000 residents per year. Given the demand, many of our English language programs are in great need of teachers, curriculum development, space, childcare, materials, and other resources necessary to create quality English language programs. Most importantly, adults taking English courses have indicated that they are committed to improving their English in order to access higher paying jobs, assist their children in school, and become self-sufficient.

In the past decade, Montgomery County has become one of the most diverse and populous counties in Maryland with a population of approximately 900,000 residents. In the last decade, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of immigrant families residing in our county. They represent at least 173 countries and speak at least 135 languages in addition to English. As a result, I expect that the demand for Adult ESL and literacy services will continue to grow in Montgomery County and across the state.

I also serve on the Superintendent's Panel for Excellence in Adult Education, and I appreciate the opportunity to examine funding formulas for adult education. I would add, however, that we do not need a panel to figure out that we need more resources in this area. I respectfully ask that you make adult education a priority and support HB 529. This would allow us to begin serving thousands of adult learners across our state. In the future, I hope we can do much more in this area.

Thank You.

